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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the teaching of journalism ethics and suggests readings to help students absorb the discipline and produce an original research paper. The paper also assists students' professional goals upon graduation. Two publications that examine journalistic ethics, "The Virtuous Journalist" (Stephen Klaidman and Tom L. Beauchamp) and "Committed Journalism" (Edmund B. Lambeth) are critically evaluated. It states that "The Virtuous Journalist" explores principles of journalistic morality and examines many relevant ethical areas, including serving the public, escaping manipulation and avoiding harm. The paper explains that in "Committed Journalism", a normative standard of journalism ethics is devised. It weighs the usefulness of both books to inform students and emphasizes that basic underpinnings of professional conduct and research methodology can be obtained by perusing the instructional analyses of "The Virtuous Journalist" and "Committed Journalism." Contains 2 references. (NKA)

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"Defining Philosophical Constructs of Ethical Journalism in a Market Economy."

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The teaching of journalism ethics is an essential part of my duties as Director of Broadcast Journalism at Southern Arkansas University. Advanced students enrolled in BJ 4903/Senior Research Project are required to produce an original research paper, 20 pages in length, that adds knowledge to the Mass Communication discipline. The material I have researched and analyzed below assists them in that endeavor, as well as making them think critically about ethics as a vital aspect of their future professional careers.

It becomes increasingly difficult in a free market economy to give newspaper readers and broadcast audiences all the news they need to know. What happens to journalistic ethics when tabloid events become mainstream stories? This paper will critically evaluate two recent publications that examine such precepts, The Virtuous Journalist and Committed Journalism. How can they assist student goals upon graduation, for instance?

The Virtuous Journalist explores principles of journalistic morality. Stephen Klaidman and Tom L. Beauchamp succeed in discussing how the philosophical disposition to act virtuously is an issue with journalists. Principles flow from the disposition to act. The virtuous disposition is one that considers principles. Certain themes and terms discussed will receive substantive evaluation.

The reasonable reader standard is a general concept. (p. 32) If it is the obligation of the journalist to service the information needs of readers in a truth-telling capacity, who came up with the idea? Who says that journalists are supposed to fill this role? A circular argument is formed.

The authors state a mythical person "is the personification of the community ideal of an informed person-one who has certain informational needs of the sort that quality general-news media are designed to serve." (p. 33) Quality news media serve the needs of reasonable readers. Presumably, such readers turn to quality media for information. The authors need to give an account here of what journalists should do.

Klaidman and Beauchamp define three different things that a competent journalist is supposed to do: recognize information that is newsworthy; place it into story form; and present it in a reasonable way. (Chapter 1) News is not talked about at all in these instances, but accounts, stories or finished products that appear in newspapers or television. However, many stories are not of interest to journalists. The news aspect is not discussed here as much as information that people need.

The authors talk about quality news media without having defined what quality news media are. They talk about reasonable reader information needs and assume that it is the business of the media to fill those needs. Few publishers would agree with

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that notion.

Another assumption is made with the concept of substantial completeness. (p. 35) Again, it is assumed that the reasonable reader has a right to get understanding from information found in a newspaper. But what type of understanding should a reader get? Messages and meanings are not necessarily the same for newspaper readers or anyone else in communicative situations. Is that really the point?

The reasonable reader standard brings with it a highly dubious interpretation of the function of the press. It is an unreasonable and unrealistic role for it to perform. By telling the news, the press services the needs of some reasonable readers. To achieve truth, a story must aim at "communicating clearly and accurately information a person needs to possess a substantial understanding." (p. 40) What does it mean to understand something? How elementary must the starting point be for stories?

Logic is an important component of the ideal of substantial completeness. The stories that journalists produce are closer to the understanding of historians than scientists. The authors appear to be working with the historical model of understanding in their book. They do not appear to grasp that journalistic storytelling is a way of understanding on its own. It deals not so much with cause and effect, but with motivations and actions

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of human beings. What did people do? It is a narrative kind of understanding.

The types of stories that journalists tell invariably involve people and their actions that happen at a certain point in time. A scientific understanding cannot be produced in journalism because people react differently under similar circumstances. Human freedom does not matter in the deterministic, deductive scientific model.

The power of the press can be defined as a way of speaking loudly using printing presses, microphones or cameras. It gives the journalist a voice that commands attention in the marketplace disproportionate to that of other voices. In the shouting of a story, there is a proclamation of news value. The importance of this story is expressed in print by the size of a headline or in television by its order in a newscast.

Klaidman and Beauchamp contend that journalists must defend with reason the newsworthiness of their statements and the appropriateness of their stories. (p. 70) They must also defend with reason the sincerity of a publication or broadcast. There must be no ulterior motive involved in the newsgathering process. The sole reason for a journalist to write a story is to make the news known. Any other reasons for printing or broadcasting a story would be suspect, with a possible hidden agenda at work on the part of an editor or publisher.

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Truth is newsworthy. A symbolic expression can be defined as true if it fits the concrete reality of experience. It is a pragmatic concept. Real knowledge entails truth. Regarding a test of truth, the view of the authors is basically represented by a fit between the concrete reality of experience and a news story proposition. It presents a way of theoretically distinguishing between tabloid journalism and serious journalism.

How do journalists bear liability when harm results from stories? The special skill reporters have is news judgment. They supposedly know what news is. The authors argue that in cases of professional negligence "Such standards are relevant for journalists because journalists claim certain special skills to deal competently with sources that have special knowledge and skills...." (p. 99)

It is difficult to ensure journalistic accountability through a set of fixed standards. Codes of ethics are generally vague. The definition of accountability differs depending upon markets, cultures and journalistic styles.

The authors make a strong and controversial claim when they say the American press, an implicit public trust, is public property and as such "is obligated to serve the public and is accountable to the public." (p. 161) They are saying the press has lost a sense of public philosophy and civic virtue since the days of Walter Lippman. A likely response to the quotation by

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publishers is that they are obligated to serve and are accountable to their readers, shareholders and advertisers. This limited accountability allows publishers to meet the needs of its public enough to maintain or improve subscription levels.

Two ways trust can potentially be maintained by a publication are through the use of ombudsmen and Reader Advisory Boards. However, each idea has drawbacks. An ombudsman is a luxury item at large urban newspapers which can afford in-house c critics. (p. 174) In addition, there is no guarantee the ombudsman will receive full cooperation from a newspaper staff when tracking down reporting irregularities. Reader Advisory Boards, supposedly consisting of a selected group of citizens within a community, may only be a sophisticated way of bypassing any type of accountability. However, they can serve newspapers well in terms of perceived accountability and as an effective public relations vehicle.

Trust can potentially be breached between reporters and sources. A great temptation for journalists in some situations is that they can become confidants of sources. Another ethical reporting problem involves confidential conversations with sources that utter potentially explosive comments. Jesse Jackson made the "Hymie" and "Hymietown" comments on what he understood was background to Milton Coleman of the Washington Post. Coleman passed on the comments to another reporter who used them in

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paragraph 37 of a Jackson story. Meg Greenfield argued later that the Jackson comments "were part of the actual record" and deserved public attention. (p. 168)

The Virtuous Journalist examines many relevant ethical areas, including serving the public, escaping manipulation and avoiding harm. It does a commendable job of examining how journalists can lift their standards by using scholarly methods instead of recounting reporting techniques at regional conferences. The authors have a problem in separating idealism and realism in journalism, and understanding they are two separate concepts. While the book should make journalists think more critically about their craft, it needs to concentrate more on the real world and news itself.

In Committed Journalism, Edmund B. Lambeth is trying to devise a normative standard of journalism ethics. He brings out what the principles of normative ethics are. Good employee ethics is not a professional ethic. It has nothing to do with being a good employee. Journalism ethics has to do with serving the public within that profession.

Since the purpose of journalism ethics is to develop a professionalism that goes beyond being a good employee, being an ethical journalist could possibly mean one that on occasion disregards an employer. Rather than compromise individual integrity, the journalist may have to resign. This is arguably a

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reason for so much turnover and burnout in the profession. These are practical difficulties in journalism ethics.

The author believes in philosophical ideas of libertarianism and the enlightenment. However, current post-modern period scholars reject the ideas of the enlightenment that built modernism. Despite this, Lambeth employs modern age philosophical constructs to fashion a theory of journalism ethics, which is the point of his book.

Teleological ethics deals with the morality or the means of achieving an end. (p. 12) Ontological ethics considers the being of a thing. Deontological ethics deals with the nature of the act itself. (p. 15) There are variations of these ideas. Ethics is teleological. Egoism is also defined. (p. 18) The end is determined by what is good for the ego.

Utilitarianism is the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It is a weak theory. How can journalists know what the good is in the long run? According to Lambeth, it calls for a knowledge that most journalists do not possess. There is no clear, unambiguous set of rules in the book to decide problematic cases of journalism ethics. However, he does provide ideas of journalistic decision making and a vocabulary in which to discuss value questions. The book locates the relevance of what it is that journalists do to the ideas of their time.

Lambeth has five levels of truth telling. They are factual,

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contextual, social truth and the natural and physical sciences. (p.26) There is no idea of a reasonable reader standard here as postulated by Klaidman and Beauchamp in The Virtuous Journalist. The position of Lambeth is more absolute. What is truth prevails over the needs of reasonable readers.

He also wants journalists to be aware of statistics in journalism, a point he brings up in recounting award-winning examples of statistical analysis used as an investigative tool. Without using such tools, the author feels his concept of the truth may not be reached. If these ideas are not implemented, journalists may miss stories or fail to see news where it is happening.

Consequently, the idea of the media serving as a watchdog is misleading. The proper function of a journalist is to cover the news. In fact, journalists will invariably become watchdogs just by reporting the news. Journalists are very selective in what they watch, tending to cover the obvious or big stories. Numerous smaller stories that affect many lives are not covered. For example, local sports is given wide coverage in newspapers while matters involving educational or regional concerns are often ignored.

Is the media losing credibility because it is not covering the news? Every event generates information. However, information by itself is not news. The most newsworthy event is

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the one which gathers the most information, and as a result, the most news coverage. The problem with most books on journalism ethics, Lambeth included, is that the notion of news is rarely addressed. Lambeth gives good arguments for the merits of journalistic stewardship. (p. 108) Unfortunately, it is often sacrificed in the real world for sensational reporting or financial gain. This behavior lends credence to critics who claim through these examples that all journalism is bad.

Lambeth describes the "Tragedy of the Commons" as overgrazing in journalistic terms. (p. 139) Journalists cannot play with the truth in terms of occasional omissions and deceptions. If they do, the public will come to doubt anything printed in a newspaper or seen on television. It is the destruction of journalistic credibility by everyone doing just a little bit wrong.

He recapitulates his position later in the book when he lists conditions for justifying deception in reporting. The only rationale for deception is if it is the only way of getting a story. Lambeth says "journalists and their editors should debate whether the likely violation is serious enough to justify the deceptive means thought capable of verifying the violation." (p. 149) A narrow, self-serving motive cannot be used as a rationale for the justification of deceit. Unfortunately, deception is a trait that often comes naturally to journalists.

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The author is calling for a moral justification of a moral need. Journalists must be prepared to go public with their reasoning before the deceptive means are adopted. In reality, the process works in reverse. Lambeth is correct in asserting that this behavior adds another animal to the journalistic pasture. The only way for journalists to protect the trust, or commons, is to strengthen the civic culture that binds people to their communities.

He discusses numerous pressures on journalists from an organizational perspective. (Chapter 6) Journalists spend most of their careers in organizations and come to live under their conventions. Does this take away any individuality in terms of their writing or reporting? It does. In fact, a utilitarian rationalization for sensational news is "Thus, showing such footage and banner-headlining the seamier side will work 'the greatest good for the greatest number'." (p. 58) Journalists who followed the rules and adhered to company policy were more likely to move up the career ladder.

Lambeth examines organizational theory, which holds that the needs of an organization often dictate what is news, rather than "the individual judgments that journalists themselves advanced as the primary determinants of news." (p. 59) An object of news organizations is to create a product that appeals to a large number of advertisers and readers. What is wrong with that?

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Journalism is a business, not a charity.

One problem with the book is that Lambeth justifies elite types of journalism over more everyday, mundane reportage. According to the author, investigative journalism saves the profession. There is no justification given for bread and butter journalism that chronicles the passage of time in a community.

The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is quoted extensively in the setting of journalistic standards and the moral relevance of stories. (Chapters 7-8) The ideas of MacIntyre in his books After Virtue and Whose Justice? Which Rationality? are applied to journalists. The insights he provides can result in richer forms of media criticism and ethics. For instance, from a MacIntyrean perspective, there are internal and external goods. Internal goods are often indivisible and come from within the profession. However, "the pursuit of more and more external goods-salary, celebrity, status, power-can corrupt practices such as journalism." (p. 73)

Numerous instances demonstrate the good of "telling the whole story." (p. 74) Lambeth falls into the trap of using survey research, computer analysis and publications such as Silent Spring and the Environmental Writer as examples. Again, daily journalism is left out, apparently unworthy of serious mention.

The writings of MacIntyre can improve journalistic standards

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and define social practices and moral life. (p. 81) Lambeth uses the MacIntyrean definition of "a teleological morality based on narrative selfhood" when describing the journalistic practices of Joe McGinniss. (p. 90) In Fatal Vision, The Selling of the President and Heroes, McGinniss uses misleading behavior in getting his stories. They are yet additional instances of the author using examples other than newspaper journalism to make his points. Lambeth is getting far afield from bread and butter journalism.

What are the "storytelling needs of a community?" (p. 93) Journalists can orient themselves in the moral, civic and cultural landscapes of communities. The MacIntryrean concept of storytelling offers a different perspective on the ethics of journalism because it focuses on potential. In the words of Walter Lippman, it gets "a community in conversation with itself."

Committed Journalism includes relevant information on the civic culture, the ethics of journalism and the law. What the book does is present an excellent case for a journalistic set of moral ethics. The links to philosophy, and MacIntyre in particular, assist in potentially improving media criticism. On the negative side, too many writing examples are outside the realm of daily journalism. Even so, Lambeth has given reporters new and trenchant methods of examining their profession from a

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moral perspective.

These texts, and analyses, serve to assist Southern Arkansas University students in their own in-depth studies of journalism ethics for BJ 4903/Senior Research Project. Indeed, beginning students often examine previous student papers to gain an early perspective on what will be expected of them later on. Not all research papers deal with ethics, or print journalism topics. However, basic underpinnings of professional conduct and research methodology can be obtained through looking at my instructional analyses of The Virtuous Journalist and Committed Journalism.

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